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ABSTRACT

It is important for leaders of volunteers to examine their attitudes toward their group, particularly their way of defining their group, and to bring a diversity of experience to their work. Three steps that should be taken to develop extension volunteers who are from low income groups and who will work with low income groups are: get them involved in your program, give them the support they need to succeed, and let them know they are appreciated. The first step involves interesting the prospective volunteer, identifying the job to be done, and recruiting the individual. The supportive step requires a lot of flexibility and variety to be successful. One of the most successful methods is to present limited amounts of information close to the time the information is to be used. The final step, appreciation, can be accomplished in a variety of ways: use symbols of group identity; present roles which will enhance the volunteer's self-image, but present them in a nonthreatening way; and extend verbal expressions of appreciation. (AG)

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APPROACHES TO VOLUNTEER LEADERSHIP

BY

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APPROACHES TO VOLUNTEER LEADERSHIP

It is a very scary feeling being before Extension workers from across the country to consider the topic of volunteer leadership. I know so well how much expertise there is in this room because I expect everyone in this room has had personal experience working with volunteers. But Rhonwyn didn't ask me to come as an expert, she invited me to be "thought provoking" relating volunteer leadership to low income audiences. Well, I enjoy being "thought provoking"--some of my colleagues might describe it with even stronger language--and I truly admire Extension workers, so I accepted.

Let me begin with a couple of observations about audience and then spend most of our time together considering volunteers.

Spending most of the past two months on crutches or in a wheelchair was a fantastic learning experience. I wouldn't recommend it to you and yet that is a very true statement in many ways. One of the learning experiences was triggered by the comment of a friend, "Well Ginny, you have surely learned how it feels to be handicapped, haven't you?" I wish I could describe the feelings I had as I replied, "No, I don't think I will ever know how it feels to be handicapped, but I surely do understand the limitations of walking with crutches, or working in a wheelchair." Was I nit-picking over words? I don't think so. I think attitudes are reflected in the words we use, and I think the very first step in working with volunteers with any audience is to examine your own attitudes. Doing this myself as I was going over some Extension materials, I discovered some words I cannot use:

"Disadvantaged" -- By whose standards?
How--socially, physically, economically, culturally?
Compared with whom?

"Minority"--Everybody is in some minority. What do you really mean?
Find a better word or attach an adjective (ex.--migrants, Spanish-speaking minority).

If you can't describe your audience specifically, you will never have the satisfaction of knowing you reached them. I raise this issue because I am struggling with the terminology "low income." It is about as heterogeneous as "teen-ager" or "senior citizen." Can we do anything to sharpen your focus? I have concern, too, that what may be descriptive terminology in a professional's plan of work can become a slap in the face if used in a face to face contact. Well, that's the first challenge--what is your attitude toward "low income" audiences?

The second challenge is also relatively personal and that is what diversity of experience are you bringing to your work with "low income" audiences? Who have you listened to, who have you worked with directly, what have you read, how much volunteering have you done? I am distressed by the polarization I sense in programs for "low income" audiences. On one end are those who maintain unless you are poor you can't work with those who are. On the other end are the folks who read Michael Harrington's Other America and have been "doing good" ever since. Of course, I am exaggerating to make a point but I think Extension personnel are in a position to meet the need for communication bridges between first hand experiences and expert opinion.

I vividly recall one of my early experiences with a "low income" audience. I was a home agent in a county with a central city of about 90,000. The Home Council and I were concerned that we weren't reaching "low income" homemakers in parts of the city so I talked to the Director of a Settlement House that had pretty good neighborhood contacts. She liked the idea but looked straight at me and said, "Honey, you can't teach these women, you are too sophisticated." Well, I have been called quite a few things but I assure you that was the first and the last time I was "sophisticated." I agreed that some of our homemaker volunteers could probably teach better than I but it would be difficult for me to ask them to do something I hadn't done or tried to do. She agreed to get a group (with the lure of free babysitting and refreshments) and I would have a disucssion about money management "Too Much Week for the Money." Well, to make a long story short, that discussion ranged from food shopping to credit, to the dress I was wearing, to birth control, and we came out with the start of a program that went for sometime. I developed two convictions then which have held up for me even though I have read experts who disagree. (1) Be yourself--don't try to be one of "them." (2) Know what you have to contribute--don't expect them to know everything they want or need. I think it is absolutely vital to test the validity of your first-hand experiences against a wider background of experience through reading, workshops, etc., and I think it is just as vital to test theory in practical application.

So these are two key questions I see coming continually:

What is your attitude toward "low income" audiences?

What diversity of experience are you bringing to your work with "low income" audiences?

Now lets turn to a framework for volunteer leadership development. There has been a great deal written in this area, and I assume most of you have read a variety of theories. If you want specific information, question me at the end and I will be glad to suggest some bibliographies. Milt Boyce and the 4-H Leadership-Development Committee have adopted and modified leadership development models to a version I assume most of you are acquainted with. I would like to suggest a modified version for your consideration in relating to "low income" audiences. It is based on an experience I had as a high school home economics teacher some years ago. There was a junior high class in food preparation and one girl was asked to peel an onion. Well, no one was watching and she peeled and peeled until the onion was all gone! What I would like to offer for your consideration is a volunteer leadership development onion peeled by McCormick. I hope there is some onion left!

Three steps for volunteer development:

Get them involved with your program
Give them the support they need to succeed.
Let them know they are appreciated.

Let us consider each step in relation to the challenge of this workshop -- "low income" audiences and see if we can't raise some thought provoking questions for your discussion and your decisions.

Get them involved with your program.

Try something with me. On some paper you have there write a sentence of ten words or less that tells me (a "low income" person who has never heard of Extension before) -- what your program can do to help me.

Some of you seem to find that easy and others fairly hard -- probably based on the experience you have had, but I assure you I wouldn't dare approach a new audience unless I could do exactly that: 1. State simply what I can provide that they might find useful. 2. Be prepared to deliver if they accept. Some of you are beginning to say to yourselves -- she is talking about promotion. You are right, I am, but I am focusing on content, not method. I think Extension is sometimes inclined to focus through the wrong end of the binoculars. Look at your sentence again -- can it be used in-face-to face conversation? An opening line for a PTA group? A newspaper article headline? A radio spot? I am betting you that if you can develop the "what," several "hows" will suggest themselves. The first step in involvement is knowing about the program. That is a very traditional concept but I am challenging you to be able to describe your program to the person who's asking "what is in it for me."

Another important concept in leadership development is identification, but again I wonder if most of the research has been focusing on the right thing. Which comes first, the person or the job? I guess the older I get the less faith I have in the "great man" theory of leadership. I have never met someone who can't do something nor have I met anyone who can do everything. I look at volunteer leadership and "low income" audiences, the identification process seems to me to be first and foremost a job identification problem. Can you describe the job that needs to be done specifically? How many small pieces can the job be divided into? Then, and only then, do I feel ready to consider who might be good for that job or to ask for recommendations. Again, a word about terminology. I don't have much luck when I go looking for "leaders." It is meaningless and frightening, especially among "low income" audiences; people do not have the self image. I have had good success finding people to "help" do a job.

There is another concept which is an important part of becoming involved and that is the concept of recruitment. What does the term "volunteer" mean to you? I once threw a dime on the floor and bet a 4-H agent that he could let everyone who walked into his office and "volunteered" to be a leader stand on it. Every "volunteer" I have ever met was made aware of a need and persuaded that he could make a contribution to its solution. That is recruitment and you may find it takes longer and you have to try harder and you have to get more help when you are working with people who have little experience in being "needed." You are giving them quite a compliment though, so keep trying. Another aspect of recruitment which becomes critical when you are concerned with "low income" audiences is

Extension's need to get organized. Does a volunteer have to have her home address and phone number on your mailing list to be legitimate? That is a sure turn-off for many people. How flexible can you be and still know who is going to help with the job that has to be done by tomorrow?

Well, I am sure you can raise other points as you discuss this. How many steps it takes to get someone involved with your program depends on so many things -- his awareness of your program, the jobs to be done, his concepts of himself, etc. I prefer to word it the way I have because I run into so many volunteers who can't remember how they got started. "I just started helping and here I am." To me that is the essential -- get people involved with your program.

It really is a short step from getting people involved with your program to giving them the support they need to succeed. By working it that way I can avoid the whole "training" versus "education" agrument, which frankly I prefer to do.

In my previous talk about jobs and people to do them, you may have noted an assumption that people already know how to do quite a few things. I am a firm believer in recruiting people to do some things they know how to do and letting them do it. Don't fall into the trap of assuming "low income" means ignorant. A couple of years ago Fred Bruny and I worked with a pilot program on male leadership and one of our premises was that we could find men to teach things boys wanted to learn from their own expertise on the job or as a hobby -- no training meetings. And it worked -- no problem. Of course, volunteer jobs, like most jobs, soon lead to the more you do, the more you want to know. That is the growth process and the need for support if one is to succeed.

Over the years Extension has been very creative about supporting volunteers and giving them the help they need to succeed. If I had any criticism, it would be our tendency to find a good method and use it to death. Those of you who have been through the "leader's guides" and "training meeting" cycles know what I mean. Successful support of "low income" leaders involves a lot of flexibility -- a great variety of methods. I remember early in the EFNEP Program in Ohio, the Extension specialists began developing some one page guides for leaders that told them step by step what to do in a food preparation meeting with a group of kids. It wasn't long before the "regular" 4-H leaders discovered these and started requesting them in amounts that staggered the EFNEP printing budget. In the midst of the uproar, I remember having to yell, "hey, you have discovered something that works a lot better than training meetings." So we started printing larger quantities and do you know what the leaders did -- started improving on them, substituting, adding, dropping. You guessed it -- another uproar. But that is the joy and the risk of asking people to do a job. They may outgrow "your" way of doing it. If volunteers are going to succeed, they will need a variety of support-resource materials, experts to call, workshops they can attend, etc. Be flexible and provide variety. With "low income" volunteers many of us seem to have more success if we provide information in small chunks close to the time it is to be used. To me,

support is a broader work than either education or training. It includes the workbooks on vitamins, the workshop on using a pressure canner, the film strip on brushing teeth, teaming up with another mother to supervise pizza making, or "helping" the nutrition aide make jelly from fall apples. It is helping the volunteer succeed with the job to be done. One unique kind of support may be necessary as you work with "low income" volunteers and that is supplies or on the job expenses. Middle or upper income volunteers frequently make a substantial economic contribution. Be sensitive here to the fine line between everyone's need to share and economic hardship.

There are some subtle implications about the wording of this concept; much too important to be missed. Note the focus on the volunteer. Somebody has to go through the job piece by piece and see where the person feels comfortable and where help will be needed. Individual orientation begins to seem time consuming to some people and they start hunting shortcuts, grouping people together for the things they know everybody needs. I am convinced this is a deceptive shortcut that loses time in the long run for you and for the volunteer. (Clark County - new leaders) Time, like money, can be spent or it can be invested. Orientation which provides two-way communication seems to me a terrific investment. A second implication of this wording is tied to the word succeed. This implies some criteria. What evidence are you going to accept for success? Sometimes I think we need educational objectives to guarantee volunteers and ourselves frustration. "EFNEP youth to learn to appreciate nutritional snacks." If you want the kids to drink milk twice a day, say so. Support the volunteer with some jazzy recipes for milk drinks and some questions that will provide good feedback.

Talk with volunteers and find out how they are succeeding. Expressions of frustration let you know what kinds of additional support are needed. Be alert for signs of new growth -- readiness for new learning, new experiences.

It is another short step from feeling successful to feeling appreciated, the last concept I would like to consider in depth. Let them know they are appreciated. It is an important difference -- one that may well make the difference between continuing to work with a program and dropping out. So lets focus hard on what makes a "low income" volunteer feel appreciated.

Symbols of group identity are many times important, especially if being part of a group is a new experience. I am sure you have experienced a variety of such symbols; membership cards; certificates, badges, pins, ribbons, etc. I really think you have to experiment with this one. Some people are embarrassed by symbols. Some symbols lose meaning because everybody has one. Some symbols are treasured beyond all logical reason--let me cite a couple of examples. I recall a county that had a wallet size ID card for 4-H leaders. This entitled the bearer to certain special privileges not the least of which was free admission to the county fair. Another county that I recall had name badges with a ribbon (like judges) which 4-H leaders wore during the county fair. Both of these were highly prized by EFNEP youth leaders. Sorry I sound like an advocate of county fairs--I am sure they are a mixed blessing but there is a point I do think

is worth making. Extension has some very positive group images in 4-H clubs and home economics Extension clubs. They won't appeal to 100 percent of the "low income" audience any more than they appeal to 100 percent of the "middle class" audience but where they have status for heavens sake why not capitalize on it.

Another part of feeling appreciated is enhancing yourself image. At this stage I find it helpful to use the very words I avoid at the recruitment stage. Let me cite an example. An EFNEP aide working with a homemaker might express willingness to demonstrate use of a pressure canner and indicate three or four others who are also interested. "Would it be all right if they came over and we worked in your kitchen?" The next time she sees the homemaker she can express thanks for her being the hostess. You can do the same thing with the roles of leader or teacher. Present the role in a non-threatening way and express appreciation with a word which enhances the person's self image. Self image is also formed by the relationship among volunteers and employees. Are volunteers treated as responsible members of the team? Appreciate the person they are as well as the job they are doing.

There is an aspect of this that is almost too obvious to mention, that is to express appreciation verbally, in writing, a mutual smile or sigh of relief--anyway which is sincere. This seems so simple that I am constantly amazed by the professionals who have difficulty. I think it is much the same principle as the expression of love among family members. In a healthy relationship it is not only there; it is openly and sincerely expressed. But beware of automatic praise. I worked as a volunteer with one agency where I believe every time I met the director she commented on what a "fabulous" job she heard I was doing. Appreciation must be sincere, preferably close to the time of action, delivered with a personal touch.

When I was talking about success a few minutes ago I indicated it was a short step to feeling appreciated. But it helps "low income" people who probably haven't experienced many successes if you verbalize it. Otherwise, they may miss it or fail to believe that they had a part in it or that you noticed. This can be a very simple statement of fact, "Jimmy is surely much less disruptive since you got him interested in cooking."

These are probably enough examples to explain the philosophy behind the three key statements which I am sure some of you thought were overly simple. I would be delighted if they are simple; so simple that they became as automatic to our way of working as breathing. In the beginning I stated them from the perspective of the professional, but I find they work just as well if I flip them to the viewpoint of the volunteer.

Get involved with a program you believe in.
Know where to get the help you need to do the job right.
Find satisfaction in knowing you are needed.

Surely by now you are saying, but that's a process for all volunteer leadership development. You are right. To me the basic principles apply to all audiences. Some people have a tradition of volunteering and to others it is a new role. Because I have a tradition of experience with volunteers and know how often they accomplish the impossible I have fantastic expectations. It helps me to deal with the frustrations of working harder and longer with some audiences to remind myself that this is a new role--they are "inexperienced" volunteers. I even go sofaras to think of something new I am learning--like golf--and think how dumb I must look to the pro. It does wonders for my patience--try it.

Well, here I am, back to one's own attitude. My thoughts about volunteers began there. If I provoked yours, I will be glad to discuss questions, but when you come full circle, its time to stop.

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